

Belarus Closes Private Radio Station

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MINSK — Belarussian authorities on Wednesday closed down a popular private radio station, accusing it of broadcasting calls for "extremist behavior," as a crackdown intensified against opponents of President Alexander Lukashenko.

The move against the radio station, Avtoradio, follows the re-election of Lukashenko on Dec. 19 amid huge street protests by several opposition groups that riot police broke up.

Avtoradio said it had been accused by the Belarus state broadcasting commission of airing public calls for "extremist behavior" at the time of the election.

"The commission has decided to annul its decision giving the right to broadcast," a letter from the commission said.

Avtoradio's chief, Yury Bazan, said in an interview that a few days before Dec. 19 the station had broadcast political calls by presidential candidates Vladimir Neklyayev and Andrei Sannikov, two of Lukashenko's challengers who are now in jail.

"We listened to the program and the only thing we found was a phrase in Sannikov's material

that said 'the fate of the country is decided on the square not in the kitchen.'

"Probably the commission considered this phrase a call for extremist action," Bazan said.

The "square" is taken to represent Minsk's Independence Square or October Square, which were both the scenes of opposition rallies on the night of the election.

Four presidential candidates who ran against Lukashenko are still being held after the mass arrests of political activists and dissidents that have been condemned by the United States and its European allies.

Meanwhile, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has told German Chancellor Angela Merkel that he would no longer oppose reinstating European Union sanctions against Belarus, a source familiar with the matter told Reuters.

The source, who attended a meeting between the two leaders on Wednesday, said Berlusconi assured Merkel that he would cease blocking Germany's push to impose a travel ban on key members of Lukashenko's government.

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